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# Local Archives And Teaching The History Of Sociology: Experiences At The University Of Nebraska-Lincoln

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# TIMELINES

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HISTORY OF SOCIOLOGY SECTION, AMERICAN SOCIOLOGICAL ASSOCIATION

## LOCAL ARCHIVES AND TEACHING THE HISTORY OF SOCIOLOGY: EXPERIENCES AT THE UNIVERSITY OF NEBRASKA-LINCOLN

Michael R. Hill, University of Nebraska

Opportunities to teach and conduct research on the local disciplinary history of sociology at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln are limited only by one's imagination and the pragmatic realities of classroom constraints. Over the years, I have been privileged to introduce Nebraska students to many particulars of the local sociological record via guest lectures in courses and colloquia, standalone PowerPoint slide shows, archival displays, informational brochures, various publications, and by distributing extensive compilations of pertinent documents on compact discs. Most recently, I included a one-and-a-half-week segment on the history of Nebraska sociology in an Introduction to Sociology course (Hill 2007c), employing a reader based in part on archival writings and documentary photographs (Hill 2007d). An independent study course on life-history documents focused on discovering and interpreting relevant archival data (Hill 2007e). More informally, I recently organized a two-hour tour for the Nebraska Undergraduate Sociology Organization, escorting its members to sociologically significant sites and landmarks on the campus, including a visit to the university archives. Tour participants were provided with a printed map and guide (Hill 2007f). The ability and opportunity to weave parochial disciplinary history into the local academic scene hinges in part on the locally-available resources, on having a history to document and explicate, and on possessing a continuing and active interest in one's early sociological predecessors.

The University of Nebraska-Lincoln (UNL) enjoys both a rich sociological history and a wealth of local archival and related resources through which to document and teach about its venerable disciplinary record. Researchers and students on the Nebraska campus find ready access to: (1) Love Library and the University of Nebraska Archives and (2) the Library and Archives of the State Historical Society. Slightly farther afield, one finds additional resources at (3) the Heritage Room at Bennett Martin Public Library, (4) the Nebraska Library Commission, (5) the Nebraska State Law Library; (6) the morgue of the *Lincoln Journal*, (7) Nebraska Wesleyan University, (8) Union College, (9) the regional genealogical services of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints, and (10) the American Historical Society of Germans from Russia. As the state capital, many centralized public records are located in Lincoln, including (11) the vital records division of the Nebraska State Department of Health and Human Services.

The founders of Nebraska sociology were major leaders in the then new discipline of sociology. Three early members of the UNL faculty eventually became presidents of the American Sociological Society (ASS): Edward Alsworth Ross (1914-1915), George Elliott Howard (1917) and Charles Abram Ellwood (1924). It is noteworthy that three other ASS presidents also had connections to the state: Henry P. Fairchild (from Crete, 1936), Edwin H. Sutherland (from Grand Island, 1939) and Louis Wirth (from South Omaha, 1947). In its early years, Nebraska produced intellectual leaders far out of proportion to its population size (Hollingworth 1938). In Lincoln, other Nebraskans of early sociological note included: James Irving Manatt, Mary Adell Tremain, Amos Griswold Warner, Roscoe Pound, Edith Abbott, Anderson William Clark, Hutton Webster, Lucile Eaves, Hattie Plum Williams, Vera Chandler Foster, Leta Stetter Hollingworth, Jacob Singer, Lowry Charles Wimberly, Joyce Oramel Hertzler, Addison E. Sheldon, Mari Sandoz, Willard Waller, August de Belmont Hollingshead, Paul Meadows, James Reinhardt, and Loren Eiseley, among others. When local wags and humorists called the University of Nebraska "the Harvard of the West," they were only half joking.

Thus, teachers and students of disciplinary history at UNL discover a felicitous mix of interesting and important persons to study combined with a substantial local cache of archival and documentary resources on which to base such studies (for examples of completed researches, see the reference section, below). The

local papers of George Elliott Howard, Hattie Plum Williams, and Mari Sandoz are especially useful, as are smaller deposits for Edward A. Ross, Edith Abbott, Roscoe Pound, L.C. Wimberly, James Reinhardt, and Loren Eiseley, among others. An important cognate deposit includes the papers of economist Alvin S. Johnson, a co-founder of the New School for Social Research and the associate editor of the *Encyclopaedia of the Social Sciences*. Among several microform resources that students can use to contextualize the development of sociology at Nebraska from a national perspective is UNL's copy of the massive microfilm collection of the papers of Chicago's well-known sociologist, Jane Addams.

Workable strategies and techniques for conducting archival research and studying disciplinary history have elsewhere been outlined in fair detail (e.g., Deegan 1988b, 1998; Hill 1993, 2000a, 2001, 2003, 2005b). It is important to emphasize that reconstructing early disciplinary history depends on the systematic discovery of many kinds of trace evidence, not just the materials and documents found in formal archives *per se*. Several resources typically found in libraries, such as city and campus newspapers, city directories, alumni and club directories, transcripts, court records, telephone books, school annuals, genealogical aids, biographies and autobiographies, local histories, and the like, should be routinely consulted and are readily available to students and researchers in the Lincoln area.

From a pedagogical perspective, instructors on the Lincoln campus can give students archival research assignments with few worries about cost or access. They can devise assignments within archival deposits with which they are already intimately familiar, on the one hand, or within materials which can be easily verified and double-checked subsequent to student reports, on the other. The archivists in the various Lincoln repositories have been uniformly welcoming and helpful both to faculty members and students who conduct archival researches.

Archival projects focused on local disciplinary history become hamstrung, however, if researchers and/or students rely entirely or primarily on locally available source material alone. Correspondence found in the George Elliott Howard papers, for example, consists primarily of letters written *to* Professor Howard. To learn what Howard wrote to other sociologists, one must typically seek materials located in non-local archives. For example, Howard's letters to E.A. Ross are found in Ross' papers in Madison, Wisconsin, and Howard's communications with Roscoe Pound are found at the Harvard Law School Library in Cambridge, Massachusetts. Thorough archival study generally requires a multi-repository strategy, and this often lies well outside the time, travel, and cost constraints of most student assignments, at least at the undergraduate level.

An alternative to costly travel to non-local sites outside of Nebraska is available in those relatively few but fortuitous cases where major archival collections have been microfilmed. Thus, with reference to the example given above, diligent students can order, via interlibrary loan, portions of the microfilm editions of the E.A. Ross Papers and/or the Roscoe Pound Papers. Microfilm is a second-best substitute for looking at the "real thing," but even a few hours' browsing through a microfilm reel gives students an important lesson in the sobering and methodical discipline requisite to productive historical research and documentation.

The relative ease with which students can today locate materials via the Internet is both a boon and a boondoggle. It comes as a deep visceral shock to most students to realize that archival materials are rarely well indexed and are even more rarely comprehensively digitized. Indeed, it is often a genuine challenge for today's students to just read cursive handwriting. Other than summary finding aids, most archival collections provide only limited hints as to what a given deposit contains, and the Nebraska deposits are no exception. For example, the Hattie Plum Williams papers are filled with student writings and research projects on numerous local organizations, but nowhere is there a list of the organizations studied. To find out if one of Williams' students specifically investigated the activities of the American Red Cross, for example, one must systematically sift through dozens of archival cartons. At the same time, the Internet provides virtually instantaneous access to increasing numbers of archival finding aids, and increasing amounts of useful

trace materials, especially newspapers, are being rapidly digitized. Nonetheless, students need to be cautioned that most of the documentation they will need for a thorough disciplinary history project will require several hours of traditional, non-digital reading and searching in libraries and archival repositories. Teachers should also be advised that the newest generation of reference librarians tends to steer students away from traditional print materials and toward digital resources. In the case at hand, this is not always productive. The digital bias can be ameliorated however, by helping students to make direct, face-to-face contacts with local archivists.

To what extent can the University of Nebraska-Lincoln experience with local archives and the teaching of disciplinary history be generalized? Instructors in schools of similar size and age will likely find many parallel opportunities and resources. The possibilities multiply exponentially in larger universities possessing greater longevity. At the same time, openings for meaningful archival research and documentation also exist at most smaller schools and colleges. My own researches at Creighton University, Wayne State College, Doane College, Nebraska Wesleyan University, and the University of Nebraska at Omaha reveal that each institution has a local history of sociology waiting to be written. Even when formal archival materials are relatively thin, students can scour minutes of boards of trustees' meetings, presidents' papers, course catalogs, student publications, yearbooks, annual reports, etc. to construct departmental time lines and brief intellectual biographies of their school's founding sociologists. Even the smallest school typically has someone, usually a librarian, who has charge of the institution's records, photographs, and memorabilia. If my experience at Nebraska is any gauge, all you need to do is just start digging — and I think you'll be pleasantly surprised by what you find.

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